GOD IS A TROUBLEMAKER
Acts 11:4-18
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I have never known anyone who wanted to be agitated, irritated, or changed, by his/her religion. On occasion, when teaching a class or leading a discussion in basic theology I have used the device of "word association" to get things going and to stimulate people to identify what they believe. In Word Association when the term "God" is brought into play people say - "father, powerful, love, comforter, healer, creator," etc., etc. but never, in my experience "Troublemaker".

In his delightful and helpful little book, Your God Is Too Small, J.B. Phillips wrote, "...some Sunday School children were once asked to write down ideas as to what God was like. The answers, with few exceptions, began something like this: "God is a very old gentleman living in Heaven...!" (p.23). Those answers are probably not unlike the vague image most of us have of God.

I am not, by the way, interested in exploring the visual, physical shape or form which you identify with God. That, the theologians have been telling us for centuries, is barking up the wrong tree. The name for it is "anthropomorphism" and it means believing in a God who looks and acts like a human being. Our faith, and the Judeo-Christian tradition is far more interested in what God does than what He looks like. We are interested, primarily, in the acts of God, not His attributes. But even here we are not inclined to perceive God as one who acts in a way which might stir up trouble. Some time ago an Italian communist made a movie of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. In spite of the fact that he portrayed Jesus as an altogether grim and humorless revolutionary, the critics and scholars acclaimed the movie as the most honest film portrayal of Biblical material ever made. But people in this country didn't like it at all: and the reason was that Jesus - and by inference, God - came off as troublemakers, agitators, disturbers of the peace.

My proposal this morning is to add "troublemaker" to whatever concepts, ideas or images you use to think about God. My proposal is to look for Him in change as well as stability, to see Him as one who agitates for change on a grand and a personal scale.

That is the Word of God which I discover in the text this morning. In the tenth and eleventh chapters of the Book of Acts a story is told, and then retold, which the author - Luke - regards as one of the most significant events in the history of the early church.

There are two characters in this story. The first is Cornelius, a Roman military officer, a Centurian in the "Italian Cohort", a division historians have determined was stationed in Syria about 69 A.D. Cornelius was what the Jews called "a God-fearing gentile". That is, he was an admirer and an adherent of Judaism: he prayed, contributed money to the Synagogue. But he was not a Jew. He had not undergone the elaborately prescribed ritual, including circumcision, which would have made him a Jew. And even if he had, the most conservative of the orthodox would have had trouble with him because, by birth and race, he was different - a gentile.

The second character in the story is Peter, disciple of Jesus, fisherman, brave, impulsive; Peter was a Jew. Nowhere does the New Testament suggest that Peter renounced his religion. In fact, it seems that Peter and people like him regarded the way of Jesus as an expression of the ancient faith of their people. It had not occurred to them, frankly, that someone could be, or would want to be, a follower of Jesus without first being or becoming a Jew.

The trouble starts when Cornelius, the gentile, invited Peter, the Jew, to come to his house in Caesarea. Good Jews had problems with the city of Caesarea itself. It had been given to Herod by Augustus, was the capital of Palestine and a thoroughly Roman/Pagan city. Like the rabid Ohio State supporters' opinion of Ann Arbor, zealous Jews weren't so sure that the whole place wasn't profane and unclean. In any event, Peter couldn't accept Cornelius' invitation without violating his own religion. According to Jewish law, the gentile Cornelius, was unclean. The ceremonial and liturgical tradition drew a line right through the middle of life. On one side were clean people and things; on the other side unclean people and things. Religious people did not associate with unclean people. To enter the house of a gentile was to become unclean oneself. To break bread with an unclean person was particularly offensive. Jesus, himself, had been criticized for doing it.

Please understand that I do not mean to be disparaging. Survival in the ancient world depended on defining what was clean and unclean, healthy and unhealthy. Certain foods, for instance, always seemed to make people sick. People who ate them died. When ancient tribal leaders deduced that - they called the food unclean, and made it a matter of morality to abstain from it. Likewise they deduced that people who had contact with other people who had sores on their bodies were likely to get sores on their own bodies. And beneath it all, they knew that the way to avoid simply being swallowed up by other nations through intermarriage and cultural synthesis, was to keep to themselves, to be rigidly exclusive. There was no other way to survive. I'm not disparaging that. One of the reasons why there are lots of Jewish people in the world today and no Babylonians is that Jewish taboos were more accurate and more strictly enforced than Babylonian Taboos.

In any event Peter had a problem when the gentile Centurian invited him over for dinner. In the meantime he must have been fretting about it. Cornelius, after all, was a nice man; a generous and pious and respectable man. Somehow it didn't seem right to Peter that his religion should exclude him so completely. Peter had a dream...nightmare is more like it. He saw a large bed sheet, full of all kinds of animals, birds and fish. A voice told him to kill and eat, which he refused to do on the basis of the dietary taboos of his religion. Those animals, birds and fish, were not kosher. Then the voice said, "What God has cleansed, you must not call unclean." Somebody is stirring up trouble here and it isn't Peter, or Cornelius, for that matter.

Well, Peter went to see Cornelius, found him receptive to the Gospel, and of all things baptized him in the name of Jesus Christ; that is, made a gentile a Christian, bypassing entirely the whole matter of becoming a Jew first.

When the leaders back at headquarters in Jerusalem heard what Peter had pulled in Caesarea they were very upset. He was severely criticized as a trouble-maker, agitator - a loose and irresponsible handler of sacred tradition.

Chapter eleven in the Book of Acts is Peter's retelling of what had happened and his defense of his behavior before a Church Council in Jerusalem. For the moment he carried the day. The assembly was persuaded that a gentile could be a Christian without becoming a Jew first. But the issue would emerge again and again in the early life of the church. In other forms the issue emerges in every generation. There is something about religion that seems to become inherently exclusive, narrow, provincial, and there is something about God, the Bible suggests, which keeps stirring up trouble every time it happens.

Historically, the importance of the story is obvious. Cornelius was the first gentile Christian. But more important for us today, the story suggests that true religion is always universal, as wide as the world: that all people are brothers and sisters - and that God can be expected to agitate for both of those points.

Sadly, it has taken some agitating. One of the most powerful motifs in human experience is exclusivism and tribalism. Human society has been organized from the very beginning on the basis of family, kin, clan - and then the extension of that elementary social structure, tribe or village, and finally, race and nation. The unit, beginning with the family or tribe, was the organizing principle of life: it is what gave the individual a sense of identity - and still does. Now, without becoming overly sociological, we need simply to see that within that powerful motif religion has always played an important role.

In the ancient world each tribe or nation had its own deity. When a nation or tribe was defeated, it was assumed that what really had happened was that two gods had tangled. One won and one lost. The Hebrew idea that there was one God for everybody - winners and losers - was extremely strange and revolutionary. So revolutionary in fact that people really didn't believe it even when they said they did.

Historians have suggested that when Constantine declared that Christianity was the official religion of the Roman Empire he was motivated not so much by piety, as by his political sensitivity to the tribal need for a common religion. his empire was coming apart at the seams and he hoped Christianity might be the cement to hold it together a little longer.

Abraham Lincoln noted, wryly but sadly, that both sides in the Civil War prayed to the same God, invoked His blessing, and claimed His support for their cause. The belt buckles of German soldiers in the First World War were inscribed with the words, "Gott Mit Uns" - God with us. There were Christian chaplains on both sides and the Nazis worked hard at giving the German people a common folk religion which would enhance their pride in race, blood, fatherland.

The Germans weren't the only ones who tried to use religion in this way. Senator Albert Beveridge returned from a tour of the Philippine Islands and addressed his colleagues in January of 1900 on the subject of the war the United States Army was then waging against the Filipino independence movement. Listen to his words...

> "God has not been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-contemplation and self-admiration. No. He made us master organizers of the world to establish a system where chaos reigned. He has given us the spirit or progress to overwhelm the forces of reaction throughout the earth. He made us adept in government that we may administer government among savage and servile peoples. Were it not for such a force as this the world would relapse into barbarism and night. And of all our race He has marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally lead in the redemption of the world." (The Broken Covenant, Robert Bellah, p.37-8).

Religion has always been a part of the worst kind of bigotry and the most destructive nationalism. In fact, religion can become its own tribe. Religion at its very worst is exclusive, narrow, confining; at its very worst religion supports and sometimes creates barriers between people, categories of clean-unclean, righteous-sinners, saved-damned.

J.B.Phillips wrote, "The Churches appear to be saying, 'If you will jump through our particular hoop or sign on our particular dotted line then we will introduce you to God. But if not there is no God for you!." Religion, that is to say, can be our tribe.

The text, the story of Peter and Cornelius, reveals religious provincialism for what it is; namely, sin, in pious attire. It suggests that egotism can be institutionalized in a fanatic patriotism or a zealous religiosity: that there is power and primal appeal to both: who, after all, doesn't want to feel that he is the best: that his race, religion and nationality make him superior: that the Gospel of Jesus Christ, however, moves in a different direction altogether. It points to a God who wants people to learn how to get along, a religion which helps people live together, not intensify their divisions. The text suggests to me that one of the acid tests of religion is just this - does it bring you closer to your fellow human beings, or does it drive you apart? Is it reconciling - or is it divisive? If it is exclusive - to the degree that it is a barrier between people, I can't for the life of me understand how it can be called Christian.

The text suggests that in God's sight people are equal. That's hardly news, and yet it is not a lesson the human family has learned easily. There simply is no room in Christianity, or the Church of Jesus Christ, for racism of any form. The text suggests that the agitation for equal opportunity, equal justice comes ultimately not from one pressure group or another, but from God himself. He is the one behind the whole movement. The aprocryphal story is told of the day Supreme Court Justice Charles Evans Hughes walked down the aisle of a large Washington church to confess his faith and become a member. He was met in the front by two other men - who also wished to join: men of different races and vastly different stations in life. The minister was said to have surveyed the scene and exclaimed, "Isn't it amazing how level the ground is at the foot of the cross."

There is a sense in which no one could be around this church for very long without learning and experiencing what I have been talking about. Indeed, there is a sense in which you are here because the subject of this text is somewhat of a priority for you. We need, all of us, an occasional reminder of universality of our religion - and the equality it demands for all of God's children. But in the final analysis, I have concluded that the word here is intensely personal, with profound implications for inter-personal relationships.

Each of us knows what it means to shut someone out, or to be shut out by someone else. Each of us knows the pain of being put down - and the temptation to put others down. We know something about the game called "mine is better than yours" and how that game, played so relentlessly, makes human contact, human communication, human reconciliation impossible. We know how that game can be cruelly exclusive because we've been both its victims and its players. And we know

also, how it can creep into the most intimate and closest of relationships, so that a once loving and supportive and life-giving marriage, for instance, becomes a battlefield on which two egos are locked in mortal combat. We know, in our professions, how easy it is simply to shut out our colleagues, to be immune to their ideas, their skills, their needs as persons. We know a little bit about the barriers that keep growing up between us.

The text suggests that the love of God in Jesus Christ breaks those barriers down: that God wants us to be open and in love with the people He has given us. It suggests that religion is for that purpose - and, finally, that we can expect God to be the troublemaker, the agitator.

The text suggests that He brought Peter and Cornelius together for the purpose of opening something up, changing something, making something bigger and better. I believe He does the same thing in my life and yours. He stirs up trouble: He forces the issues: He makes us uncomfortable with the status quo: He pushes us - to change and grow and become. He wants us to live a full life: He wants us to become everything we are capable of becoming: He wants us to discover the goodness and beauty of life lived in love with others. And He wants that enough for us - to push, agitate, stir up trouble to get it. You can count on it.

Amen.

Father, give us the courage to be more than we are. Open us to your love - stimulate us to what needs changing in our lives: and teach us again that You love us - and all your children in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.